PAY ATTENTION
June 11, 2006

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Psalm 29
John 3:1–10, 16, 17

"The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes."
John 3:8 (NRSV)

Most people, even though they don't know it, are asleep. They're born asleep,
they live asleep, they marry in their sleep, they breed children in their sleep,
they die in their sleep without ever waking up. They never understand the loveliness and beauty of this thing we call human existence. You know, all mystics—Christian, non-Christian, no matter what their religion—are unanimous on one thing: that all is well, all is well. Though everything is a mess, all is well. Strange paradox, to be sure. But basically, most people never get to see that all is well because they are asleep.

Anthony de Mello, S.J.

Walter Brueggemann, who spent the last two weeks with us as our Theologian in Residence and whose preaching and teaching were a great gift to this congregation, startled me, literally, and a lot of you last Sunday not only by demonstrating that a great sermon can be delivered in thirteen minutes, but also with his benediction. Walter's Pentecost sermon was about the Spirit, the Breath of God, the Holy Spirit that animates and energizes all of life and that blows like a wind in the world and in our personal lives.

The good news, Walter said, is that the Wind of God is blowing. It may come as a breeze and warm you. It may come as a sudden gust and ruffle you. It may be a storm that blows you to a new place. Whatever it is, pay attention.

Walter also said that Pentecost Sunday is the one Sunday of the year that Presbyterians talk about the Spirit. It reminded me of that old story about a Pentecostal woman who walked into a Presbyterian church during worship, made her way to a front pew, and began immediately to respond, out loud, to the minister's sermon. "Amen. Hallelujah," she said. "Preach it, brother. Praise God. Yes Jesus." People around her became increasingly uncomfortable as her enthusiasm increased and her responses became louder. When she stood up and raised her hands, an usher appeared at her side and whispered, "Ma'am, is there something wrong?" "No," she said. "Nothing is wrong. I just have the Spirit." "Well," he said, "you didn't get it here."

Walter was only slightly wrong. We talk about the Spirit at least twice: once on Pentecost and then the next Sunday, known historically as Trinity Sunday, when traditionally the church has thought about the doctrine of the Trinity, God in three persons, God in three expressions, manifestations — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Creator, Savior, and living, lively, mysterious presence in the world.

It is our uniquely Christian idea that our God is known by and comes to us in three ways. Not three Gods. In fact, it helps to know that person, persona —from which we get the word *personality*—used to refer to the masks an actor wore in a Greek drama. One actor could play three parts. One God comes to us in three ways.

Most of us understand God as Creator—God the Father. And most Christians understand that God came into human history in Jesus Christ—God the Son. The Spirit—God the Holy Spirit—leaves us a little uneasy. And that's as it should be. The Spirit holds the rest of it together. The Spirit is the presence of God, the energizing, empowering, sometimes comforting, sometimes challenging and irritating presence of God in the midst of human life.

Western Christianity, particularly Reformed/Presbyterian Christianity, has been inclined to turn God into a concept, an intellectual thesis. When we talk about God, we do so in carefully worded discourse, in books of theology and creeds. It is our specialty. It is our gift to the rest of the church. But there is another and older way to think about God, namely God's presence in nature, the human experience of the mystery of God in nature's power, nature's ferocity, nature's beauty: the human experience of the

inexplicable, the transcendent reality that will not be confined to creeds or hymns or even church buildings.

“The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders,” the psalmist wrote. “The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the oaks whirl, trees are stripped bare and in God’s temple all say, ‘Glory.’”

This is a big, mysterious God whom we meet, the psalmist says, when we pay attention to the world around us.

Pay attention, my parents told me over and over again, because I don’t. The world, I have concluded, is divided between scanners and focusers, between people whose eyes are always darting from horizon to horizon, and people who focus on details, who pay attention and, therefore, see a lot. I drove my parents to distraction. I would be sent on an errand to bring my father a pair of pliers from his workbench. They’re right there, he would say. I couldn’t find them. When I reported, he would walk down the steps, slightly irritated but always patient, and pick up the pliers, reposing there right where he said they were. Open your eyes. Pay attention. If you are a scanner, you need someone in your life who is a focuser or you’re going to miss a lot—miss a lot of God, in fact.

Nicodemus, one of the Bible’s best seekers and searchers for God, comes to Jesus one time at night. It is a very familiar story and a lot has been written about. I read it differently this time. I heard Jesus using language designed, I think, to persuade Nicodemus to start paying attention. Something was going on in Nicodemus’s life. Something was stirring, keeping him up at night, thinking. Something motivated this wealthy, prominent man about town to come, at night, to Jesus. “The wind blows where it chooses; Nicodemus, you hear it, feel it, pay attention to it, even if you can’t see it.”

Novelist Doris Betts says that religious faith is not “synonymous with certainty—but a decision to keep your eyes open.” Pay attention—I need that advice. I can walk through the Garth garden, so lush and alive and varied and beautiful, so crammed with the goodness of God, and never see a thing because I’m thinking about all I have to do or I’m running late. Pay attention. Slow down. Look and see and smell—and experience the goodness of God.

Jesuit scholar, the late Anthony de Mello thinks we’re asleep mostly. I’m not sure I agree. I think we’re in a hurry mostly, distracted, so focused on what

we need to be doing next that we miss the moment; so obsessed about getting through the day's objectives that we miss the flower, the smile, the child, the kindness—the presence of the Spirit of God.

One of the reasons I try to read a little poetry is that it requires full attention. You can't scan a poem. You have to read it out loud actually, listen to it, hear it, experience it.

Here's one, for this sermon, on this June morning.

> "The Summer Day" by Mary Oliver
>
> Who made the world?
> Who made the swan, and the black bear?
> Who made the grasshopper?
> This grasshopper, I mean . . .

And then the poet describes a grasshopper sitting in her hand, "her jaws moving back and forth, gazing with enormous and complicated eyes." As the grasshopper flies away, Mary Oliver says,

> I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
> I do know how to pay attention.

Every textbook on preaching advises, never read a poem in a sermon. But we're thinking about paying attention to the presence of God's Spirit in the world, and poetry commands attention. So here's a second one.

By Wendell Berry, one of his *Sabbath* poems he writes after walking in the woods on Sunday morning instead of going to church. He essentially goes into the woods and pays attention.

> The question before me, now that I
> am old, is not how to be dead,
> which I know from enough practice,
> but how to be alive, as these worn
> hills still tell, and some paintings
> of Paul Cezanne, and this mere
> singing wren, who thinks he's alive
> forever, this instant, and may be.

It is our deepest conviction and most precious belief that the God who created this world and everything in it continues to create, and energizes and animates the world with the breath of life, and that we meet that same God when we pay attention to the creation.

And that same God is wondrously, mysteriously present in the ordinariness of our lives: the food we eat, the drink we share, the work we do, the love we are given, the love we give, in all of life—God the Holy Spirit actually working to reconcile, redeem, create newness.

How sad to miss that, to hurry past the mystery, on our way to the next appointment.

Bill Moyers spoke at Hamilton College graduation a few weeks ago. He thought out loud about what he would like to be told if he were graduating from college in 2006:

> I would like to be told that there is more to this life than I can see, earn, or learn in my time. That beyond the day-to-day spectacle are cosmic mysteries we don't understand. That in the meantime—and the meantime is where we live—we infinitesimal particles of creation carry on the miracle of loving, laughing, and being here now by giving, sharing, and growing new.

And then Moyers told the graduates one of his favorite stories, about a man named Shalom Aleicheim. Every possible misfortune and calamity happened to him. He lost his wife; his children neglected him; his house burned down; his job disappeared. But Shalom always returned good for evil everywhere he could until he died. When the angels heard he was arriving at heaven's gate, they hurried down to meet him. Even God was there. It was the custom in heaven that every newcomer was interrogated by the prosecuting angel, to ensure that all sins on earth were covered. But when Shalom arrived, the prosecuting angel, for the first time in the memory of heaven, said, "There are no charges." The angel for the defense then recounted how in spite of all the suffering and hardship the man had always returned good for evil.

God said, "Not since Job have we heard of a life such as this one." And then turning to Shalom he said, "Ask, and it shall be given to you."

The old man raised his eyes and said: “Well, if I could start every day with a hot buttered roll.” And at that the Lord and all the angels wept, at the preciousness of what he was asking for, at the beauty of simple things: a buttered roll, a clean bed, a beautiful summer day, someone to love and be loved by.

Jesus told his disciples once that he came that they might be alive; that they might live abundantly, joyfully, eternally, with no fear of anything. He told Nicodemus, to pay attention to the Spirit moving in his life.

Jesus, the Gospel says, came that we, you and I, might not perish—which really means get lost, wander aimlessly through life with our eyes closed—but that we might have eternal life, that we might live fully, every moment of this precious gift of life we have been given: life full of God’s Spirit.

So, yes, may we pay attention.

Amen.